

The Virginia Speedways Project: Researching the Landscape of the Virginia Speedways

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Abstract:

In the late 1940's rural Virginia and North Carolina saw the rise of a regional sport - stock car racing - that would come to epitomize for many people an image of the rural south of the mid to late twentieth century. The evolution of stock car racing was accompanied by the development of a significant social and physical Virginia landscape that thus far has been neglected in contemporary scholarship: the short track. Carved from farmer's fields and natural amphitheaters new tracks, or "speedways" first appeared as temporary landscapes associated with the weekly ritual of racing competition. But by the 1950's full time tracks and their featured event, "Saturday Night Racing", were significant features in the social and recreational landscape of small towns throughout Virginia. Deeply rooted in their communities, today those tracks that remain are important landscapes of community pride, social intercourse, ritual, and entertainment.

Viewed collectively the Short Tracks offer a unique opportunity to add to our understanding of the Virginia landscape as a rich and varied series of layers to be experienced. More importantly the short tracks can be clearly presented and understood as a significant *contemporary* layer to the Virginia landscape. As such, they can augment the more commonly recognized layers of the Virginia landscape: the James River plantations, the state's civil war battlefields, the Virginia county courthouse complexes, and the Virginia mineral springs.

Despite their significance within their communities and the larger Virginia landscape, the short tracks are at risk. Changing economics and expanding development have led to the closing of many of the early tracks, but a significant number of tracks have survived. These tracks comprise a significant cultural landscape that deserves to be recognized as a landscape of historical importance and contemporary economic potential.

This paper will present on-going research on the lost vernacular landscape of the Virginia short track circuit of the 1940's 50's and 60's. Through interviews with former drivers and track officials over 60 lost community tracks have been thus far identified in addition to the twenty-four tracks still in operation. Mapping of the lost tracks is underway and their landscapes are being reconstructed through period images and maps, written descriptions, and interviews with participants, track officials, and sponsors. This paper will also demonstrate the important role of GIS in mapping and understanding those landscape layers associated with the tracks and GIS's expanding role in understanding historic landscapes. The lost and existing tracks will be revealed as landscapes of community pride, social intercourse, ritual, and entertainment of interest to

landscape historians, historical landscape architects, preservationists, and contemporary designers.

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The Virginia landscape has long been a place of particular interest to historians and designers alike. Its evolution, from the earliest English settlement at Jamestown through the plantation landscapes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to contemporary sustainable communities, can be understood as an important chapter in the making of a truly American landscape. It is, for many Americans, a familiar place recalling images and memories of the James River plantations, tidewater towns, courthouse complexes, Revolutionary and Civil War Battlefields, the piedmont, Blue Ridge Mountains, and the Shenandoah Valley. There are, however, significant Virginia landscapes, not part of that familiar understanding that, thus far, have been neglected in contemporary scholarship. If revealed, these landscapes, embedded in both the state's cultural memory and its memorable places, can challenge our understanding of the Virginia landscape and provide new sources of inspiration and understanding for landscape projects throughout the Commonwealth. This paper presents the research currently underway by the Virginia Speedways Project to document one such Virginia landscape: the Landscape of the Virginia Speedways.

In the late 1940's rural Virginia and North Carolina saw the rise of a regional sport - stock car racing - that would come to epitomize for many people a mid to late twentieth century image of the rural south. The evolution of this sport was accompanied by the development of a remarkable number of local racetracks that, collectively, comprise a statewide cultural landscape. Carved from farmer's fields and natural amphitheaters the first new race tracks, or "speedways" were temporary sites for the weekly ritual of racing competition. But by the 1950's, construction of new, more permanent speedways had begun in earnest. Through the 1960's and 70's these speedways, and their featured event, now known as "Saturday Night Racing", were significant features in the social and recreational landscape of small towns throughout Virginia. Thus far, the Virginia Speedways Project has identified over 130 Virginia speedways at more than 80 sites throughout the state. The first phase of the Project, to document the locations, layouts, landscapes, and photographic record of the Virginia speedways, is currently underway. In addition, over thirty nearby speedways in North Carolina, West Virginia and Maryland where Virginia drivers raced are also being documented.

Automobile racing in Virginia did not begin with the development of the post World War II speedways. Open-wheel Indianapolis-style and "midget" racing were popular throughout America during the early years of the century. Sponsored by the American Automobile Association (AAA), the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA), the Central State Racing Association (CSRA), and the American Racing Association (ARA), these races were commonly held on the one mile and half-mile horse racing tracks at county and state fairgroundsⁱ. The earliest documented automobile race in Virginia occurred in 1907 on the one-mile oval at the Virginia State Fairgrounds in Richmondⁱⁱ. From that date through the 1930's, the primary sites for automobile racing in Virginia remained the state's fairgrounds. The fairgrounds at Winchester, Norfolk, Suffolk, Roanoke, Tasley on the Eastern Shore, and the Virginia State Fairgrounds in Richmond, all served as automobile racing venues during this periodⁱⁱⁱ. It was natural that the fairgrounds, social gathering places serving as a focus of community and regional

celebration and competition, with their existing tracks would be the sites of the state's first automobile races. A central feature of the typical fairground was a one mile or half-mile dirt track oval used for horse racing. With wide sweeping curves and a grandstand for spectators, these fairground tracks were easily adapted for the new sport of automobile racing.

Following World War Two there was a revival of automobile racing at the old fairground venues. Again, it was the open wheel cars that were featured. The Virginia State Fairgrounds in Richmond and the Suffolk Fairgrounds both hosted races in 1946. Automobile racing also appeared for the first time in 1947 at the fairgrounds in Danville and Keller, on Virginia's Eastern Shore^{iv}. The open-wheel race cars were a significant presence at the fairground tracks well into the 1950's. But during this period a very different type of auto racing was gaining acceptance in the mountains of western North Carolina and Southwest Virginia – stock car racing - that would soon supplant the open-wheel race cars at racing venues throughout Virginia.

Many of the Virginia fairgrounds proved suitable venues for racing stock cars. By 1953, the fairgrounds at Lynchburg, Petersburg, Tazwell, Fredericksburg, and Wise all saw the introduction of stock car racing to their featured events^v. The growing popularity of this new type of racing was soon accompanied by a new generation of automobile racetracks in Virginia. These new “speedways” were built specifically for the racing of stock cars. More local in character and intimate in scale than the earlier fairground tracks, the speedways proliferated. By the 1990's stock car speedways had been in operation on over 80 sites throughout the state. The research of the Virginia Speedways Project is revealing the Virginia speedways to be significant sites in the social and recreational landscapes of small towns throughout Virginia. Collectively, the speedways constitute an important vernacular Virginia landscape that offers a unique opportunity to add to our understanding of the Virginia landscape as a rich and varied series of layers to be experienced.

The growth of the Virginia speedways parallels the growing popularity of stock car racing throughout the south^{vi}. The primary organizing body for stock car racing throughout the region was NASCAR, the National Association for Stock Car Racing founded in 1948 by Bill France. Once considered a strictly regional sport, stock car racing as promoted by NASCAR and its premier racing division, the Winston Cup Series has developed into one of the largest spectator sports in America. The roots of that sport run deep into the Virginia landscape and its speedways. But researching the history of the Virginia speedways poses special challenges. Stock car racing has not been, at least until very recently, a mainstream sport. Its rough and tumble early days, with legendary stories of “racin’ and fightin’ ,” and its association with bootlegging resulted in little attention to the sport's competition sites and even less focus on the social landscape of the sport.

As a result, today, no single archive or resource has a complete list of the lost Virginia speedways and the documentation of the speedway's sites and histories is limited at best. Most speedways had no track historian, no official photographer, or publicity staff. Posters and local newspaper ads announced the week's race and the local paper published the results of each week's competition. Some speedways printed weekly programs with driver standings, photographs of the previous week's race, and perhaps information on the local competitors. Few of these documents survive. No plans, written descriptions, or photographic records of the local

speedways are known to exist. To date, most interest in the old speedways has been focused on early careers of those Virginia drivers who have gained fame after their talent took them to higher levels of racing and to venues far removed from their hometown speedway. More significantly, the generation of racers who pioneered the sport and the development of the local speedways is passing on. Soon the remaining primary sources and first person histories of the speedways will be lost.

The Virginia Speedway Project's research has, thus far, relied on several critical sources. First, the memories, personal documents, and photograph collections of surviving racers, along with their knowledge of the old speedways and their locations has been invaluable. Speedway photographs and documents have been found in the personal collections of the competitors and their families, track officials and announcers, reporters, spectators, and racing enthusiasts. The archives and collections of local newspapers, historical societies and racing related organizations such as the International Motor Sports Hall of Fame in Talladega, Alabama and the Virginia Carolina Old-Time Dirt Racers Association also contain important information about the speedways and limited photographic records. Period Air Photos taken by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service and the Virginia Department of Transportation have proven to be critical to confirming the location of many of the speedways. Importantly, many of the old speedway sites, though long abandoned, are still extant. Site visits to the old speedways, contemporary photographs, and recent air photos have also contributed significantly to the emerging understanding of the evolution of the speedway landscapes. Finally, an invaluable secondary source of information has been Allan E. Brown's *A History of America's Speedways: Past and Present* which lists the names and locations of many of Virginia's lost and existing auto racing venues.

What has emerged from the research thus far is a tantalizing glimpse of a significant Virginia landscape. Beginning in the late 1940's the consistent and recognizable landscape of the early fairground's was augmented by a rich fabric of speedway sites and designs. As the sport grew, inferior sites and poorly run facilities were replaced by better venues run by more professional promoters. The speedways evolved in response to driver, spectator and sponsor demands, growing business pressures, safety advances within the sport, changing insurance regulations, encroaching development and, to the eventual shortage of the competitor's preferred race cars. The results were fewer, often shorter, speedways, better facilities, and a transition from the early dirt tracks to primarily paved speedway ovals.

The documentation of the speedways has focused first, on the physical landscapes of Virginia's lost speedways and, second, on understanding the social landscapes of the Virginia speedways past and present. Documenting the lost speedway sites has, in some cases, proven difficult. Long abandoned, often overgrown or heavily wooded, the exact locations of some sites are difficult to recognize today. Other speedways have disappeared completely as their sites were developed. Interviews with former drivers, car owners, and spectators have been critical in locating those speedway sites on contemporary maps. The speedway locations are then confirmed using both period and contemporary aerial photography. The contemporary aerial photographs, available on-line from the USGS, are also used to determine each speedway's UTM Coordinates which can then be used to map the speedway sites using the Arc View GIS program.

Finding period air photos has proven particularly important since no plan of any lost speedway has been discovered thus far. Combined with period photographs, these air photos allow site features such as track layouts, entry roads, seating areas, grandstands, supporting structures, parking areas, pit areas, and landscape features such as ponds, streams, and period vegetation to be located and identified (fig. 1). But photographs from any single vantage point, including aerial photographs, are limited in what they reveal about the landscape composition of each speedway. Period photographs, for instance, rarely show the entire speedway site. Typically they are focused on the participants and specific race action. But photographs from different sources, vantage points, and races are being combined to recreate the lost landscapes of the speedways (fig. 2). Contemporary photographs of taken from the same vantage points as period photographs are being used to document the evolution of those speedways that are still in use today (fig. 3)

The evidence to date indicates that as the speedways developed distinctive typologies emerged. The original fairground tracks were flat tracks suited to horse-races. If the fairground featured harness racing, the track's turns were elevated and, in some cases, a tunnel under the curve provided access to the infield (fig.4). Like the old fairground tracks, there were generally two general types of speedways: flat tracks and those with elevated or banked turns. There were also distinctive types of sites chosen for speedways. The fairgrounds were located on large, flat, well drained, open sites. Many of the new speedways were sited on similar, flat, open sites, often located in floodplains adjacent to streams. A significant number of the speedways were sited in natural amphitheaters or narrow valleys. These speedways took advantage of existing topography to provide spectators with natural hillside vantage points for viewing the race (fig.5). Eventually, the hillsides were augmented with temporary and, later, permanent seating. The natural slopes allowed the spectators to be safely separated from the action on the track. Other speedways, less permanent in nature, were sited on agricultural fields. All three typical sites allowed speedways to be constructed with a minimum of earthmoving. Only the elevated turns of the banked tracks required significant ground manipulation. Occasionally, however, significant effort was undertaken to create a speedway site. In one case, Route 58 Speedway outside of Danville, the owners carved deeply into an existing ridge to create a three-sided amphitheater for their speedway. It was then necessary to import suitable clay soil from a nearby location to surface the track. That amount of intervention on a speedway site, however, appears to be unusual.

Natural water features were found at most of the early speedways. All of the early speedways were dirt tracks and a significant amount of water was required to prepare the track surface for competition. Typically a nearby stream or pond served as the water source and was a significant feature of the speedway's landscape composition and occasionally a race hazard (fig.6). At a few speedways, ponds were even located in the speedway infield^{vii}. A water truck was usually used to wet the track surface, but at least one speedway installed an irrigation system to wet down the track before each night's racing card^{viii}.

The speedways themselves varied in size and configuration. The fairground tracks were typically a half-mile in length. Many of the early speedways continued the half-mile tradition. But, as new speedways were built on a variety of sites, shorter speedways evolved. 4/10th, 1/3, and quarter-mile speedways all became common. Over time, some of the longer speedways were reconfigured to shorter distances and slower speeds. In at least one instance that reconfiguration was in response to higher insurance rates charged for the longer, faster half-mile ovals^{ix}. As the

larger speedways were reconfigured into shorter ovals, the result was often several speedways overlaid on one another on the same site (fig.7).

Documenting their physical landscapes, however, can provide only a partial understanding of the Virginia speedways. The Virginia speedways continue to constitute a significant social landscape. From its inception stock car racing was, and remains today, a family activity. Brothers, fathers, uncles, cousins, wives, and husbands participate in the sport as drivers, crew members, and in support positions. Family members work together as teammates or, while supporting each other's efforts, compete against one another. Rooted in their communities through strong family ties, the speedways remain community social and recreational gathering places. A race is a day-long event, with drivers and crews arriving early in the day to prepare for the testing and qualifying trials that precede the evening races and establish each race's starting order. Community gatherings at holidays are common at the speedways and many speedways serve as informal community centers in times of need^x.

Interviews with drivers have revealed that, in the past, there was another social landscape associated with the speedways. Many of the local speedways were part of informal racing circuits that developed throughout the state. The competitive nature of racing soon saw drivers anxious to test their cars and skills against the best drivers at other nearby speedways. Local speedways often coordinated their racing schedules allowing drivers to race on several nights of the week at different speedways. It was not at all uncommon for drivers to race on Friday and Saturday nights and then again on Sunday afternoon; all at speedways within easy driving distance of home. One such local Virginia circuit was comprised of Eastside speedway in Waynesboro, which raced on Friday night, Natural Bridge Speedway, which raced on Saturday night, and the Craigsville Motor Speedway, which raced at 2pm on Sunday afternoons^{xi}. Similar informal regional circuits existed throughout the state. A step up in scale and competition was the more formally organized and promoted Dixie Racing Circuit, which in 1952, sponsored races at Lynchburg, Danville, and Roanoke, Virginia and at Henderson and Camp Butner, North Carolina^{xii}. Drivers from both states traveled the circuit on a regular basis.

As the sport grew, some speedways began to offer larger purses and better competition through the sponsorship of promoters such as the Dixie Racing Circuit and NASCAR. The result was the development of a multi-level racing circuit frequented by the state's better drivers. These drivers often raced at local speedways on weeknights and then, seeking better competition and larger prize money, they traveled farther distances to more competitive speedways with races on Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons. Some drivers raced as often as five times each week, racing at nearby local speedways on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday nights in preparation for each weekend's competition^{xiii}.

Understanding that the speedways were not just isolated local sites, but rather part of a larger cultural landscape that spanned the entire state of Virginia and extended into North Carolina, suggests that mapping analysis of the speedways could provide significant additional understandings about the speedways collectively. Mapping is currently underway, using the Arc View GIS program, to investigate the speedways as a statewide cultural landscape. Each speedways is being mapped by date, type, length, surface, site characteristics, racing schedule, and whether it was part of a regional or local racing circuit. Work is also underway to map both

where the Virginia drivers lived and where they raced. Finally, the regional economic influence of today's speedways is being investigated by mapping the location's of corporate and small business sponsors who support racing at the each of the states existing speedways. Slowly the complex fabric of the speedway's physical and social landscapes is being revealed.

Today over 20 Virginia racing venues remain in operation. Deeply rooted in their communities they, like their predecessors, are landscapes of community pride, social intercourse, ritual, and entertainment. Collectively they offer a unique opportunity to add to our understanding of the Virginia landscape. We believe the work of the Virginia Speedways Project will reveal these speedways to be a significant *contemporary* layer of the Virginia landscape and a cultural landscape of historical importance and significant economic potential.

ⁱ Allan E. Brown, *The History of America's Speedways* (Comstock Park, Michigan: America's Speedways, 1994), p. 13

ⁱⁱ Brown, p. 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brown, p. 518-26.

^{iv} Brown, p. 519-20.

^v Brown, p. 518-26.

^{vi} Stock car racing was not a new phenomenon. America's first stock car race may have been held as early as 1907. It gained only a limited following in the years leading up to World War Two. After the war, stock car racing was reintroduced by promoters and saw growing popularity in the mid-west before finding its strongest support in the southern states. See Brown, pages 75-8.

^{vii} Interview with Harlan Reynolds, Lynchburg, Virginia, December, 2001. Harlan and others have noted that 501 Speedway north of Volens had a pond in its infield.

^{viii} Interview with Peanut Turman, Dugspur, Virginia, November, 2001. The speedway was Log Cabin Speedway in Henry County.

^{ix} Interview with Peanut Turman, Dugspur, Virginia, November, 2001.

^x A good example is the New River Valley Speedway in Dublin Virginia, which served as a primary collection site for relief supplies for victims of flooding in nearby West Virginia in the summer of 2001.

^{xi} Interview with Richard Fox and Arbil Welcher, Craigsville, Virginia, December, 2001.

^{xii} Advertisement, *The Lynchburg Virginia News*, April 18, 1952. Collection of Harlan Reynolds.

^{xiii} Interview with Carlton Pugh, Danville, Virginia, November, 2001.



Fig. 1 Tazewell Fairgrounds c.1952.
(Virginia Tech Geology Library)



Fig. 2 58 Speedway, Hillsville, Va. c. 1958. (Photographs courtesy of Peanut Turman.)



Fig. 3 Above: Pulaski County Speedway c. 1960's. (Courtesy New River Valley Speedway.) Below: the New River Valley Speedway photographed by the author from the same location in 2001.



Fig. 4 An early photograph of the Tazewell Fairgrounds. Note the tunnel under the first turn. (Library of Virginia)



Fig. 5 Spectators on the hillside at the Floyd Speedway in the 1950's. (Courtesy Lavonne Zachary)



Fig. 6 The pond at Pulaski County Speedway. (Courtesy New River Valley Speedway.)



Fig. 7 Starkey Speedway c. 1962. A quarter-mile paved speedway has been built within the old half-mile dirt oval. (Virginia Tech Geology Library.)